

**Elmer Young and James Nelson Oral History Interview, 6/11/1964**  
Administrative Information

**Creator:** Elmer Young and James Nelson

**Interviewer:** Pamela Turnure

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**Biographical Note**

Young and Nelson, White House florists during the John F. Kennedy (JFK) Administration, discuss Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy's involvement in White House flower arrangements, their interactions with the Kennedy children, and the flower arrangements for JFK's funeral, among other issues.

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## Elmer Young and James Nelson

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Oral History Interview

With

ELMER YOUNG  
and  
JAMES NELSON

June 11, 1964  
Washington, D. C.

By Pamela Turnure

For the John F. Kennedy Library

TURNURE: This is an interview with Elmer Young, who is head of the White House flower room, and James Nelson, who is assistant in the White House flower room. I'll start with you, Mr. Young. How long have you been on the White House staff?

YOUNG: It will be eleven years in September.

TURNURE: And how long have you served in your capacity as head of the flower room?

YOUNG: I think it was actually '62 when they officially appointed me. It was August 1962, although I had been in charge for about a year already.

TURNURE: Reorganized. And how long have you been here?

NELSON: I was here nine years last October.

TURNURE: Working in the flower room also?

NELSON: Yes.

TURNURE: Can you describe what your duties entail in working with the flowers?

YOUNG: Well, supervising and checking the rooms and actually arranging flowers for the family quarters, state dinners and receptions, social functions, receiving and sending gift flowers, memorial, commemorative wreaths, funerals, etcetera.

TURNURE: And weren't the Kennedys very interested in flower arrangements, especially Mrs. Kennedy [Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy].

YOUNG: Yes, Mrs. Kennedy was concerned about kinds and colors and types of arrangements to be used in the different rooms.

TURNURE: Did she supervise part of the flower arrangement, or did you do it all?

YOUNG: Well, first she did come in quite a bit and gave us an idea of what she liked, the kind of flowers she liked. Mrs. Kennedy mentioned or suggested flowers and colors for certain rooms and sometimes wrote notes or had the usher or secretary pass along her wishes.

TURNURE: Did she have a special kind of flower that she particularly liked?

YOUNG: Yes.

TURNURE: Do you remember what kind?

YOUNG: Well, mostly daisy type flowers. She liked marguerite daisies, delphiniums, lilies, anemone, ranunculus, lily of the valley, things like that. Mrs. Kennedy liked lily of the valley and took them many times and placed them on President Kennedy's [John F. Kennedy] grave. Once, Mrs. Kennedy mentioned liking a white and pink tulip called Queen of the Bartigans or it may have been Beauty of Valendan.

TURNURE: Was there a special way that she liked to have them arranged that was different from the way it was done before?

YOUNG: She liked a less formal arrangement, more naturally arranged, more of a mixture of flowers and colors.

TURNURE: Can you recall the first time you ever met Mrs. Kennedy?

YOUNG: I probably have it in my notes somewhere. I don't actually remember when I met Mrs. Kennedy. I think it was in the flower room soon after they moved into the Mansion.

TURNURE: Do you remember, Mr. Nelson?

NELSON: Yes, I do. It was up in the main hallway, and she was sitting on the couch as I went by, and she spoke to me. And I said, "I'm Mr. Nelson," and she said "I'm Mrs. Kennedy."

TURNURE: Do you remember what else she said to you?

NELSON: She told me she liked the flowers fixed in an informal way like a little home. She didn't want these large arrangements. She liked them just sort of informal. Small, garden type arrangements.

TURNURE: Do you have any particular story that you remember about the President or Mrs. Kennedy that might be of interest?

NELSON: Well, I remember one evening that the President called me at home, and my little brother answered the phone, and he was all excited." The President is on the phone!" Everyone was excited in the house. When I got on the phone, the operator said, "The President would like to speak to you." So I said "All right." So he said, "Mr. Nelson?" And I said, "Yes sir, Mr. President." He said, "The grass out in my garden has got a lot of brown spots in it. What can we do about it?" And I said, "Well, gee, I don't know, Mr. President. We've been having an awful lot of trouble out there." And he said "Well, could you see what you could do?" And I said "Yes sir, Mr. President, I'll find out first thing in the morning. I'll call someone and see if they can't do something about it." That was some experience. I'll never forget that as long as I live.

TURNURE: He was really interested in everything that was going on around him.

NELSON: Yes.

TURNURE: He obviously came through the flower room many times on his way to the pool. Did he comment on things that you were working on or the flowers that were around there?

YOUNG: Once the President admired some large long stem red happiness roses we were arranging. Sometimes he'd stop and ask what the different flowers were. Usually, it seemed like he was in a hurry, and he was halfway out the door by the time you finished.

TURNURE: I think you started to tell the story about once when you had some bulbs growing in your...

YOUNG: Yes. These were probably the paper-white narcissus we forced in the flower room. One night the President came through after a reception, with his tie in his hand. He wanted to know what those plants were on the counter, and I told him cyclamen plants. And he said "Well they look a lot like orchids. How much do they cost? Do you get to keep the pot? How long do they last? Where're you going to use them? He said "You do a great job." I said, "Thank you, Mr. President", and he left and went into the pool. He always asked a lot of questions. Once he came through when we were making a wreath for Benjamin Franklin and he asked what it was for. He said, "Do you make those, do you?" I told him Mr. Ralph Dungan [Ralph A. Dungan] was going to present it for him. The president was in his white robe coming from the swimming pool in slippers as he often was when he passed through our room. Once as I came out the west door of the mansion on the ground floor and I passed the President coming out of the Flower Room door and he said "Did you do the flowers tonight. I said, "Yes, Mr. President." As he kept walking toward the mansion door he said, "How do they look?" I said, "Fine, I hope." (On November 1, 1961— we were arranging flowers for the Truman Dinner [Harry S. Truman] when the President came through the flower room from the pool, smiled, and said, "Are these for tonight?")

TURNURE: He was really-----about and was really interested.

YOUNG: Pardon?

TURNURE: He was really interested, in other words. He cared.

YOUNG: Yes.

TURNURE: Did he know much about flowers?

YOUNG: I don't think he really did, did he Jim?

NELSON: No.

YOUNG: Oh, one thing, he always liked to wear a blue bachelor button (cornflower). If he was going to formal dinners, we had to keep bachelor buttons on hand. But, I wouldn't say this was his favorite flower, but it served this purpose.

TURNURE: Did he have the flower upstairs before the dinner?

YOUNG: Yes. Usually George [George H. Taylor], the valet, would take it up to him or he'd call for one. Once I spent a couple hours scouting around town trying to find a bachelor button for the President.

TURNURE: Did he have flowers in his office?

YOUNG: Toward the last year, we kept a little antique silver vase, I think was given to him by the president of Ireland, and we kept roses, geraniums, carnations in that. When he first came into office we kept a larger arrangement on a side table.

TURNURE: And where was that? Was that on his desk?

YOUNG: It (the small silver vase) was kept over on the other side of the room—Did he have a couple of sofas there?—on a lamp table or sofa table.

TURNURE: Did you find them both cooperative and easy to work with, both the President and Mrs. Kennedy?

YOUNG: Yes, they were very nice; they were good to us. Once I brushed the President with my wet hand by accident when he passed my work table and said, "Excuse me, Sir."

TURNURE: What about the children? Did you see much of them?

NELSON: We'd see them in the halls in the mornings when we came up there.

YOUNG: Caroline [Caroline Bouvier Kennedy] would say, "Hi" sometimes when she saw us.

TURNURE: Do you remember any particular stories about them?

NELSON: Well, I remember it was just, I think it was around October. I was up there and little John Kennedy [John F. Kennedy, Jr.] was walking along with me and I had a vase of flowers and he said "What are you going to do with those?" I said "Well, they're flowers and they die. We have to replace them. Some of them die you know." He said "Well, why do they have to die?" I said "Well, I don't know. Everything dies, that's human nature." He said "Well, I don't understand why they have to die." I'll never forget that.

YOUNG: Didn't you think that was just before the assassination? (I remember once hearing Caroline call out "Shaw-no towel.")

NELSON: Just before the assassination. He was so cute.

TURNURE: He was like his father in asking a lot of questions.

NELSON: Yes, ma'am. Very inquisitive. He used—to didn't he Russ—he used to walk up the hall a lot with you?

TURNURE: And Caroline, was she interested in the flowers? Did she ever ask about them or ask for a flower? Different times she wanted flowers to give to her mother and father.

YOUNG: Yes, I've made notes at different times when the President or Mrs. Kennedy or John John or Caroline would say something. In fact I have one here. On the morning of Thursday, January 14, 1961, John Jr. was crawling around on the second floor hall to the living room, while I was fixing flowers. Caroline came along and asked why I didn't put flowers in her room. She said she would like lots of them and she would give some to her mother and father. She had a little doll with her that had just been given her, and Mrs. Shaw [Maud Shaw] was with her. I asked the doll's name and she said that she hadn't named it. She had just received it. She said she had so many dolls, it was hard to think of enough names but she told Mrs. Shaw that they would have to think of a name. In my notes on November 21, 1963, 10:25 a.m. John, Jr. asked me on the second floor what I was doing, and I said fixing flowers. He said "Are they going to die? Let me smell them." I let him smell a carnation and he wanted me to smell it.

TURNURE: That's a nice story. Did you ever pick flowers for them?

YOUNG: No, we never did actually keep flowers in her room, did we?

TURNURE: What about things like birthday parties and other occasions?

NELSON: She had a little vase back in her dressing room, remember the few occasions we put flowers in that? A little silver vase.

YOUNG: Do you remember the party we had at Easter time when we had those styrofoam bunnies?

TURNURE: Oh, yes.

YOUNG: I was just telling Miss Turnure something that tickled me was the last Columbus Day that the President was in office, they had a ceremony in the West Garden and the band was there playing. They were a little bit too long-winded I guess. The President, he wanted to get into his speech and talk. He tried to stop them, but the bandmaster had his back him and everything, and no one seemed to take the initiative to stop the music or anything. He never did get the music stopped. They just played right through their number. All the while, he was trying to get them to stop; putting his hand up, you know. (Once when Mr. Powers [David F. Powers] was talking with me in the Flower Room, the President passed the door and said "Dave, you want me?" Mr. Powers said "Yes, Mr. President and they walked toward the office in conversation.)

TURNURE: You saw many of the most historic ceremonies from your vantage point in the flower room.

YOUNG: Sometimes we missed a lot of them too, because that's when we're usually the busiest, getting ready for a dinner.

TURNURE: Do you remember any incidents of the children when they were going over perhaps to see their father in his office?

YOUNG: I happened to read to Jim as we were coming in, "Friday, 11 A.M., December 15, 1961, President Kennedy started out the door into the garden on the way to the office and Caroline was following behind with a glass of juice. It looked like orange juice and the President said Goodbye and closed the door. And she started to cry and said, "I want to go with you." So he came back and put his coat around her and they walked through the garden and into the office together with the dogs, Charlie and Pushinka."

TURNURE: They followed him over to the office quite a bit, didn't they?

YOUNG: Yes. Remember towards the last, one day we heard a little tooting and we looked out the door and the President passed and John John was behind with his little horn tooting all the way over. We had a lot of laughs and a lot of fun.

TURNURE: I bet you did. And then there was a period when you shared your office with Bernard Lamotte, the painter, who came to do the murals for the President's pool. Do you remember any interesting stories from that time?

YOUNG: My memory isn't sometimes as good as Jim's, but I remember Mr. Lamotte eating his lunch there on our flower table; French cheese, I don't know what you call it.

TURNURE: Where did he keep his food?

YOUNG: In our refrigerator with the flowers.

TURNURE: So you really have a lot of pleasant memories, don't you?

YOUNG and NELSON: Oh yes.

TURNURE: And you must have missed them when they left, I'm sure.

YOUNG: We did. It seemed such a change to have a young couple in the White House. Things are so much different I think. The President used to stop and read our paper at our desk.

TURNURE: You were there how many administrations?

NELSON: Well, I was just there with Eisenhower [Dwight D. Eisenhower] and Kennedy.

TURNURE: You were there at the same time.

YOUNG: Yes. Of course they had the grandchildren but it wasn't like two little ones just living in the House.

TURNURE: Could you tell us about where you were on November 22, at the time of the assassination? Do you remember where you were?

YOUNG: Yes, I was in the flower room and we had the radio on. I was shocked; I could hardly believe it when I heard the President had been shot. First thing I did was run out into the hallway there, where the policeman was and mention it to him and he said later that I was a white as a sheet. The next person I saw was Dr. Travell [Janet G. Travell] standing in the doorway saying goodbye to someone.

TURNURE: And neither of them had heard it?

YOUNG: No. I mentioned it to Dr. Travell and she hadn't heard it. She went back into her office right away.

TURNURE: And where were you, Jimmy?

NELSON: I'd gone to a movie, and when I was coming out, one of the ushers told me that the President had just been shot and it didn't sink in at the time. I got in my car and turned the radio on and they said that President Kennedy had just been assassinated and I couldn't believe it. I was in a daze, I pulled in a gas station to get some gas and the gas station attendant said "Wasn't that a senseless thing that the President was shot?" I think everyone I spoke to, they just couldn't believe it. It was a dream.

TURNURE: Did you come back to the White House that night?

NELSON: Yes, I called Rusty at work and he said I'd better come in because they were quite busy with everything.

TURNURE: What was the first thing that you had to do, Rusty?

YOUNG: I can't remember now. I suppose I started making flower arrangements for the State Rooms.

TURNURE: You were making an arrangement at that time?

YOUNG: That night we made a spray of flowers for the East Room, for the bier, the catafalque.

TURNURE: And what was the arrangement?

YOUNG: We used white Alba lilies, *Lilium Specisum Alba*, one of Mrs. Kennedy's favorite flowers, also white carnations, white roses, chrysanthemums, phaladenopsis orchids, Bermuda lilies and Magnolia foliage. It had all white flowers in it.

TURNURE: Had Mrs. Kennedy specifically asked for this arrangement?

YOUNG: Yes.

TURNURE: How did you get the message that she wanted this done. Did she call you?

YOUNG: I think it came through the usher's office.

TURNURE: And were those the only flowers that she wanted?

YOUNG: They asked that we put green magnolia leaves in the big urn that we usually keep flowers in in the East Room.

TURNURE: Where did you get the flowers? Were the shops still open? Or did you have to open them specially that evening?

YOUNG: I remember Mr. Sharon, owner of Nosegay Florist, helped us get the white roses. We had some flowers on hand and we got in touch with our wholesaler.

TURNURE: And did you continue to do flowers for the upstairs quarters?

YOUNG: Yes, we kept flowers on the first floor too, all during that 30 days of mourning. And we helped that night drape that black crepe.

TURNURE: What time did you get home that night? Did you work all through the night?

YOUNG: We worked all through the night.

TURNURE: And then what happened the next day? There were a lot of flowers arriving, but you didn't have as much to do with that, did you? The ones that were sent by heads of state?

YOUNG: Well, I stayed in the flower room and Jim went over to the Executive Office Building, where we'd set up temporary rooms to receive flowers. He and some of the men from the Florist Telegraph Delivery and the Society of American Florists helped receive over 500 arrangements. This didn't include some of the flowers received at the Capitol and at the cemetery.

TURNURE: And they came from all over the world?

YOUNG: From heads of state and individuals children.

TURNURE: And what did you do with these flowers? Do you remember?

YOUNG: A lot of them were sent to hospitals and homes for the aged, etcetera.

TURNURE: And some went to the Capitol, isn't that right?

YOUNG: Yes.

TURNURE: And then did you have to do another arrangement for the catafalque?

YOUNG: Yes, in fact we did two of them for that. One on each side up there (at the Capitol).

TURNURE: And Mrs. Kennedy asked that it be the same way?

YOUNG: Yes.

TURNURE: Did you work on the flowers for the church?

YOUNG: Yes. We used those two large urns (blue vases which used to be in the Blue Room) that you see in the Blue Room. I think you suggested those. The blue urns given to the White House during the administration of Theodore Roosevelt and have been in the White House since 1902.

TURNURE: Do you recall what flowers you arranged for the Church?

YOUNG: They were white stevia, daisy type chrysanthemums, alba lilies, carnations and roses. They were similar to the flowers we used in those sprays at the casket.

TURNURE: Who was in charge of the arrangement of the flowers? I mean, I know you were, but did Mrs. Kennedy come to you? How was it decided?

YOUNG: Mrs. Mellon [Rachel Lambert Mellon] worked quite a bit with us on that.

TURNURE: Mrs. Paul Mellon?

YOUNG: Yes.

TURNURE: And then did Mrs. Kennedy have a special request for flowers at the graveside?

YOUNG: She had Mrs. Mellon make up an arrangement of flowers, using quite a few from the President's garden near his office. He liked the garden very much and they thought that would be nice although it was getting late and there weren't many flowers. There were still some white roses that were in pretty good shape in the garden. Those were used in the basket (natural wicker with a handle) with green nicotina, hawthorne berries, soulangeana magnolia buds, crabapple fruit, sedum seiboldi, geranium foliage, dark red carnations, lily of the valley and geraniums.

TURNURE: Where did they put them? In a basket, wasn't it?

YOUNG: Yes, and then Mrs. Kennedy placed that, the day of the funeral, didn't she?

TURNURE: Those were the only flowers that were on the grave?

YOUNG: Yes. We had that little gold basket of lily of the valley. She took the valley out and placed it on the grave.

TURNURE: When was this?

YOUNG: This little gold basket that you see up in the west hall, she used to keep it by her sister's picture.

TURNURE: This is in the period before she moved out of the White House?

YOUNG: Yes, Ma'am.

TURNURE: And you kept it filled with lily of the valley at that time?

YOUNG: Yes. And whenever she'd make a visit to the grave, we'd go up there and it would always be empty, because she'd take a little bunch of lily of the valley with her.

TURNURE: There were no other flowers, except I remember there were some from the heads of state, which were on the Hill. So Mrs. Mellon really worked with the flowers for the funeral?

YOUNG: Yes.

TURNURE: And then after the funeral, you kept doing the flowers and they had flowers in the State Rooms?

YOUNG: Yes, until the period of mourning was over. One thing I remember now too; I was over at the cemetery and Jim was in the flower room at the White House and one of the secret service agents. Mrs. Kennedy had told him when she left the church to get in touch with us and have the church flowers brought to the cemetery. So I called the flower room and Jim made arrangements to have those flowers picked up and brought over. We managed to get them there before the procession arrived at the grave.

TURNURE: That must have been quite a feat of getting through the traffic and motorcycles.

YOUNG: We had to get a motorcycle escort.

TURNURE: And you took the flowers out of the blue urn?

YOUNG: Yes, Ma'am.

TURNURE: And they were placed over the grave? In closing, is there anything either of you would like to say?

YOUNG: I'd just like to say that the Kennedy family was always very friendly and they always had a smile and a "hello" for you.

TURNURE: Do you feel the same way, Jimmy?

NELSON: Yes, I do. They were always very nice to me. Just wonderful people to work for. I couldn't want any better people to work for.

TURNURE: That's very nice.

YOUNG: When Mrs. Kennedy said goodbye she asked me to try to continue fixing the flowers the way we had been. We were in the West Hall on the second floor, and we formed a line to be received by Mrs. Kennedy and John, Jr. was going down the line shaking hands with all of us. Mrs. Kennedy had pictures made of the flower arrangements used for official social occasions at the White House.

FLOWERS USED IN THE WHITE HOUSE DURING THE KENNEDY  
ADMINISTRATION

Carnations  
roses  
tulips  
stock  
ranunculus  
anemone  
lily of the valley  
peonies  
lilium speciosum  
alba and rubrum  
auratum lilies  
regal lilies  
marguerite  
floriosa  
berbera  
killian  
majestic daisies  
iris (Dutchess Spoon & Peter John disbud Chrysanthemums)  
chrysanthemums (mostly daisy type, and anemone type)  
heather  
gypsophila  
freesia (one of Mrs. Kennedy's favorites)  
forsythia  
apple, pear and plum blossoms  
pussywillow  
cornflowers (bachelor buttons)  
waxflower  
candytuft  
delphinium  
lencocoryne  
gladiolus tristus  
geranium  
forget me not (myosotis)  
sweetpeas  
heliotrope  
hyacinths  
lace flower  
chionanthus virginica (fringe free)  
calliopsis  
peach and prunus yoshino cherry blossoms  
wild cherry blossoms and foliage  
styrax

flowering crab  
kerria japonica  
pyracantha  
spirea  
weigela  
hawthorne  
flowering quince  
lilac  
buddleia (summer lilac)  
mock orange  
viburnum  
deutzia  
sweet william  
calamondin miniature oranges  
salvia  
greenmagic and bronzino lilies  
strawflowers  
daffodils  
paperwhite narcissus  
astible  
hansonii lilies  
allium  
boltonia  
shasta daisies  
calanthe  
cymbidium  
phalaenopsis  
oncidium  
dendrobium  
epidendrum  
odontoglossum  
vanda orchids  
hesperis (sweet rocket)  
globe thistle  
madonna lilies  
larkspur  
gaillardia  
dahlias  
coreopsis  
cosmos  
canterbury bells (campanula)  
foxglove (digitalis)  
scabiosa  
zinnias  
silverdollar

eucalyptus  
bermuda (easter lilies)  
nasturtiums  
calandula  
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tuberoses  
asters  
verine  
crabapple foliage with berries  
sumac foliage  
fall oak and  
sophora foliage  
bonvardia  
scented geranium foliage  
stevia  
holly  
euphorbia  
acacia  
benidium  
tulip magnolia (soulangeana)  
violas  
feverfew  
calla lilies  
heliopsis  
agapanthus  
dusty miller foliage  
st. joseph lilies  
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ageratum  
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